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ABSTRACT

In part a rebuttal to an editorial written by Ronald Regan which appeared in the "Denver Post" stating that English teachers should go "back to the basics," this paper argues that rules without reason, drills without meanings, and writing and reading without imagination are mechanical exercises without expression of self. What English teachers must encourage in their students is creativity. The creative process involves having a problem or need, considering what alternatives are available, deciding on a course of action and following it, and getting feedback in order to evaluate the result. The following six general guidelines are listed: students must be made comfortable in the classroom surroundings; students cannot fear the teacher, fellow students, or self; teachers should help students feel a reason to read, write, listen, and speak effectively and imaginatively; students should understand clearly what is expected in the class; teachers should provide a variety of learning experiences; and students deserve an audience besides the teacher for their efforts with opportunities for feedback. Included are a list of ingredients vital to the creative process, some guidelines for a creative classroom atomsphere, and a list of creative activities. (TS)

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RONALD REAGAN'S RIGOROUS DRILLS
and the
SWINGING '60'S ENGLISH ELECTIVES

Several weeks ago, an evening edition of the Denver Post ran an editorial written by Ronald Reagan. The editorial is a plea for English teachers to go "back to the basics." Basics to Reagan apparently means "plain old readin' and writin'." He bases his argument on a recent news story concerning a survey by the Association of Departments of English. The survey of 436 colleges reported that "students are leaving high school with a much poorer training in fundamentals than before."

Reagan points to verbal inadequacies of youth evidenced by such recent expressions as "ya know---like---I mean" and blames this verbal inadequacy on the permissiveness of the 1960's English electives curriculum. His solution calls for a return to what he remembers as "those endless grammar drills; stuffing your head with rules and exceptions-to-rules. . . singsong recitations of 'Evangeline' or 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner'. . ." which, he continues, now appear to be the true "key to one's ability to write clearly. . ." Reagan's solution to the problem of how to turn students into literate adults is "rigorous drills. . . compulsory courses. . . a well-planned and supervised reading program. . ."

If all the English teachers in the schools today were to follow Reagan's formula, the task of teaching English would instantly become a far, far easier one than we have ever known. And if all English teachers in America today were to believe in Reagan's formula, I could not believe in a future for America.

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Rules without reason, drills without meanings, writing and reading without imagination, mechanical expression without expression of self. These are "basics"? Basics perhaps for turning out a nation of robots; certainly not for human beings.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." To employ the mechanics of language without imagination is to limit a person's world to that of a veritable wasteland. Without ideas and emotions, there is no need for language. Reagan's attack on the '60's approach is justified in the sense that in its permissive extreme, it is almost as shallow an approach as Reagan's rigorous drills. The '60's extreme of disorganized, unrelated, irresponsible "creativity" without structure restricts the individual to living in a world alone because he cannot go outside the limits of self to connect himself with others--he does not possess the tools for making this connection. Both these paths of extremism are narrow and self-centered. Both destroy. Neither is creative.

Reagan fails in his editorial to reach for the real basic--the basic of human potential, the basic that makes humans human. To be human is to create. To create is to possess the ability to express one's self in some concrete form. Creativity is what keeps humans from being like Malvina Reynolds' "Little Boxes" that all look the same--or from being one of T.S. Eliot's "Hollow Men"--or from being a product of Aldous Huxley's <u>Brave New World</u>.

Creativity is what makes a musical composition different with each person or group that plays it and brings the music to life in a new way. It's what makes the difference between a dinner that is a matter of consuming calories to keep one from starvation or a sensory delight to savor and exclaim over and remember. It's what makes the performance of a dance by a creative dancer a living experience for the viewer. It's what makes the difference between reading a novel imaginatively and merely reading the words because it's a book everyone's talking about. Creativity is what makes life exciting and mysterious and unpredictable and wonderful!

Reagan's editorial speaks in half-truths, as so many other newspaper items have in recent months that are advocating a "back to the basics" in English teaching. Part of the ability to be creative with language is possessing the tools for language creativity. These tools include 1) a knowledge of and facility with language skills (or Reagan's "plain old readin' and writin'"), 2) a wide variety and background of life and language experiences, and 3) a great deal of exercise in using language imaginatively. Before these elements can be put into effect, though, there must be a need or a desire--a motivating force--to use language in the most effective and creative way possible.

William Faulkner says in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that an initial requirement for writing well is that the writer must put all fear aside. He says that good writers create out of the materials of the human spirit--that they write of the "problems of the human heart in conflict with itself"--and that they are motivated to write out of love, not lust. Superficial reasons or motives do not produce good writing. Faulkner's élan vital of the human voice includes courage, endurance, responsibility, and a desire to listen and respond solely to the human spirit.

The creative process is different for each person, but certainly amateurs can learn by listening to the professionals. In his essay "Zen and the Art of Writing," Ray Bradbury describes the technic he uses in the creative process. This process consists of three parts, but the parts must work together as the parts of an automobile work together. If one part is not functioning, the entire mechanism becomes crippled. Bradbury's formula is: Work. Relaxation. Don't Think.

What this means is that first a writer must turn out quantities of writing (in English classes, include reading and listening and speaking). During this process of grinding out quantity, the writer learns skills and technics and constantly searches for more effective ways to express what he feels. "Not to work is to cease, to tighten up, become nervous," says Bradbury, "and therefore destructive of the creative process."

After a writer has produced quantities of work, his body and brain can work automatically for him. He doesn't have to think about dangling participles and organizing a paragraph clearly. He doesn't have to think about where to place a comma or how to spell a word. Those processes become--out of sheer quantity of practice--largely automatic. The mind can then relax. It's like learning to swim or ride a bike or prepare a meal--after concentrating on each particular part of the process, the process eventually becomes an automatic whole.

When the mind is freed, it can plumb the depths of its own subconscious and open itself to input from the outside world. Those things from the subconscious and those from outside self then begin to bubble and boil and brew up marvelous new concoctions. Bradbury says, "What do you think of the world?. . . Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper. Make your own individual spectroscopic reading."

Bradbury adds that work in the sense he's using it equals love. This echoes what Faulkner said about creating out of the materials of the human spirit--creating out of love, not lust. Reagan's editorial completely ignores the reason for good reading and good writing. The '60's electives approach neglects how to produce good reading and writing.

To produce this good reading and good writing, English classroom structure demands some additions to Faulkner's and Bradbury's advice to embryonic writers. Teachers must work with a number of students who are not motivated and who are of many levels of ability in language use. The logical place to begin is with a highly motivated, caring teacher who will consciously go about building an atmosphere that will encourage creative productivity in his students.

1) The student needs to feel comfortable in his classroom surroundings.

2) The student cannot feel fear of his teacher, his fellow students, or of himself.

3) The teacher should help the student feel a reason to read, write, listen, speak effectively and imaginatively. He should encourage the student to feel emotion--anger, love, hate, sorrow, fear, desire--so that he will want to verbalize that emotion. In short, the teacher must try to bring his students to life or bring life to his students.

4) The student should understand clearly what he is expected to do and how he is to do it. He can be highly creative within the bounds of a clearly structured assignment. He needs structure, but he must have freedom to express himself within that structure.

5) The teacher should provide a variety of learning experiences. A student's curiosity and desire to express himself should be aroused through exposure to a wide variety of ideas and of ways to express reactions to those ideas.

6) The student deserves an audience (besides just the teacher) for his efforts with opportunity for feedback. This gives him the incentive to continue to grow and to deepen his language creativity.

Perhaps none of our students will be William Faulkners or Ray Bradburys, but each of them deserves the chance to explore and develop his own unique language potential.

To achieve this goal it is vital to equip students with mechanical skills, but at the same time it is vital to provide many opportunities to exercise imaginative powers. Reagan insists that creative language experiences should be offered only "after the student has a strong foundation of reading and grammatical writing--not before."

What Reagan ignores is the fact that by the time a child is three years old, he generally has a working facility with his language. He also has infinite curiosity and an incredible ability to observe the minutest of details and to see things in completely fresh, original ways. Reagan's system will kill a child's imagination by threatening him or boring him or confusing him. The '60's "system" denies him a system for expression. What the child needs is for someone to provide him with the language tools he needs to express what his imagination conceives. The tools should be given the child when he has a readiness for them.

Good English teachers have provided a full language experience for their students in every generation, no matter what current educational fad happens along. Good English teachers continue to provide a full language experience for their students within the framework of whatever current system their schools are prescribing.

Supplement to 'drills and electives'

Some ingredients vital to the creative process:

1) Establish a creative, anything-is-possible, frame of mind.

2) Develop a love and caring in yourself about life.
Be willing to make a commitment to an idea born of the human spirit.
Be willing to do the very best that you can.

3) Learn skills and practice them daily.

4) Develop the art of asking appropriate questions and learn to make relationships among ideas.

5) Learn to be selective in what and how you use the materials you work with--develop a sense of perception.

6) Be aware--be open and interested in everything and everyone.
Do not close doors.
Develop an inquiring mind.
Expose yourself to many kinds of people and experiences.

7) Learn to relate abstractions to things concrete or that relate to the senses (develop sensitivity, sensibility, and sensuality).

8) Acquire a knowledge and an acceptance of self and be true to that self.

9) Accept others--or at least refrain from judging others.
Recognize that there is no ONE WAY to solve or do something--
that there may be as many ways of doing a thing as there are people--each individual has his own perception of things and his own style of expressing that preception.

10) Have the courage to try your own ideas--to risk failure--or to create something that may turn out to be bigger than yourself.

11) Recognize when an idea is dead and decide whether to drop it or change course.

<u>The Creative process itself involves:</u>

1) Having a problem or a need.
2) Considering what alternatives there are.
3) Deciding on a course of action and doing it.
4) Getting feedback and evaluating the result.

Some guidelines for a classroom atmosphere conducive to the creative process:

1) Does your room have a warm feeling? Do you have colorful posters, dried or fresh bouquets and plants, mobiles, in the room?

2) Does your room arrangement give the students a feeling of equality and intimacy? (Can you use a circle or semi-circle with yourself on the same level as the students?)

3) Does your room stimulate thought? questions? ideas? Do you have quotations, poems, news articles, editorial cartoons posted or written on the blackboard? Are there books and newspapers on shelves and tables?

4) Are you in the room when the students come in?

5) Do you put yourself into a positive and open frame of mind before the students enter the room?

6) Do you smile at and/or greet various individuals by name before class begins?

7) Do you respect each of your students as a unique human being?

8) Do you <u>listen</u> to what your students say?

9) Do you enjoy a variety of kinds of life, reading, and writing experiences?

10) Are you willing to try something new in your classes?

11) Do you provide different kinds of learning experiences for your students?

12) Are your assignments reasonable, clearly stated, and meaningful to the students?

13) Do you keep private things private--both for yourself and for your students?

14) Do you provide audiences for student writings and speaking activities, other than just yourself? Do they feel a reason to write, read, speak, listen?

15) Do you provide experiences for which students do not receive letter grades?

16) Do you try to ask questions that have no answers?

17) Do you try to examine as a class both professional and student writings for things that are good as well as for identifying weaknesses?

18) Do your class activities allow for individual differences in abilities and in interests?

19) Do you take a few minutes each period to share things of interest among the class members? (a news item, a poem, and event or issue at school or in the community)

20) Are you flexible enough to drop or change a plan that isn't working?

21) Are you fully aware that you are working with adolescents who are experiencing a multitude of physical, emotional, and mental changes?

22) Do you believe that brains and imaginations need exercising of all kinds on a regular basis if they are to grow and become better?

23) Have you seen the film Why Man Creates at least once?

24) Have you read Neil Postman's and Charles Weingartner's books and articles (sometimes they write together, sometimes separately)? Have you read Jeffrey Schrank's Teaching Human Beings? Have you read similar works of other authors?

25) Do you read the English Journal and your state NCTE affiliate magazine?

26) Do you read Media and Methods magazine?

27) Do you send off for materials available through the preceding magazines as well as other sources?

28) Do you exchange ideas with elementary school teachers?

29) Do you attend meetings, conventions, and workshops with the intention of sharing ideas?

30) Do you utilize resources in your own community, school, and student body?

31) Do you try to make yourself and your students consciously aware of language and of using it in positive, creative ways?

32) Do you read--and ask your students to read--from highly creative writers like Ray Bradbury and e.e. cummings--and from children's literature (some of the most highly creative writing there is)?

Some creative activities that have been around for quite awhile that you might like to be reminded about and to add to:

1) Make visual collages or mobiles or taped sound collages a theme idea.

2) Plan and print a class newspaper. (print probably means ditto)

3) Write a book review of a book you wish you could read.

4) Write an original joke.

5) Write a tall tale, a myth, a fable, or a legend.

6) Write the lyrics for a ballad.

7) Make a dictionary of current slang expressions (this could be a group or class project).

8) Turn a short story into a taped "radio" broadcast complete with emcee, commercials, musical background, and sound effects.

9) Stage a classroom mock trial.

10) Write your description of a "dream" car--home--job--school--or community.

11) Create a comic strip or make a filmed cartoon.

12) Put together a slide-tape program using poetry or narration around a theme (can be done individually, in pairs, or threes).

13) Write metaphors for the school lunch menus.

14) Plan and do a videotape program recording (the format of the original TV show "Laugh-In" works well).

15) Make up an original grafitti.

16) Provide various kinds of sensory experiences, then have the students describe them in figurative language.

17) Write "found" poetry.

18) Write concrete poetry.

19) Interview one another (pairs) and write up a "personality profile" of the person interviewed.

20) Keep a journal (not to be graded but to be given some direction).

21) Have frequent, brief exercises in observing and remembering details.

22) Write lists of your loves--hates--nightmares--dreams. Use these lists as ideas for stories, poems, or essays.

23) Write 30" radio commercials; headlines; photo or picture captions (these activities give practice in being creative and in being concise).

24) Write a series of "outrageous statements" (i.e., The little old lady hopped into the Jaguar, floored it, and peeled out.). Choose one of them from your list and develop it into a story.

25) Hand out construction paper word cards to small groups. Use the words to construct poems, phrases, sentences of various types--whatever structure you need to work on.

26) Imagine that you are a tree (or a mouse or a turkey or whatever). Describe yourself and then how you feel about something.

27) Write a letter-to-the-editor about an issue you strongly support or strongly object to.

28) Ask three different people to read aloud "in just" by e.e. cummings. Discuss what happens in the different interpretations and what the effects are and why.

29) Take a silent nature walk, jotting down all the sensory images you become aware of. Return to the classroom look at what you have written down, think about what you felt as you took the walk, and then write whatever you wish about it. Write fast and don't worry about mechanics. This is a "first draft." You may write in whatever form you wish--description, narration, poetry, or anything your imagination calls for.

30) Write a letter telling your Aunt Kate about your date to the Senior Prom. Then write a letter to your best friend about your date to the Senior Prom.

31) Use pictures, quotations, music, or special sound effects to stimulate creative writing.

Some selected examples of individual ways of expressing a similar response to life:

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

No man is an island, entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main;
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the lesser;
As well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friends,
Or of thine own were;
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind;
And therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls
It tolls for thee. --John Donne

I AM A ROCK

A winter's day
--Paul Simon

WHO AM I?

It took me more than twenty years to realize that they lived in me, that I was part of them, and that in spite of distance, time, and difference, I was part of them (her family). I was not, in short, alone.
--Marya Mannes

With all beings
and all things
we shall be as relatives.
--Sioux Indian

U is a part of Us.
--Gunther

There is only one man in the world
--Carl Sandburg